

NEWS

Historic Irrigation Practices in the Heber Valley

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Special to the Wave 4-20-05

In the past several years, the Central Utah Water Conservancy District (CUWCD) has been working to replace water that was diverted from the Uinta Basin to the Heber Valley. This water was formerly administered by the Daniels Irrigation Company and will be replaced with Central Utah Project agricultural water stored in the Jordanelle Reservoir.

For over 100 years the Daniels Irrigation Company and its predecessors diverted water from the upper Strawberry River Basin to the farming communities of Daniels and Buysville. As a result of this project, the natural stream flows in the upper Strawberry River and its tributaries have been restored.

As part of this project, several of the Daniels Irrigation Company irrigation features, near U.S. Highway 40, between Bjorkman's Hollow and the McGuire Tunnel, were removed. A few of the more prominent historic features have been stabilized and left in place along an interpretive trail that is still in the process of being constructed

of 1859, 19 families had settled on 20- to 25-acre plots.

Although it is not clear who dug the first irrigation ditch in the Heber Valley, the diversion of water from rivers and springs in the vicinity of the settlements began quite early.

The population of the Heber Valley increased rapidly after these first settlements were established. By 1862, the population had increased from the original 19 families to nearly 1000 residents. The settlements of Heber City, Mound City (also known as Upper Settlement), Lower Settlement, Midway, Charleston, Buysville, and Wallsburg were all established during the late 1850s and 1860s.

These settlements were located near streams and other sources of water, reflecting the need of the rapidly growing population for new water sources. The settlement of Buysville and the nearby town of Daniels were located on the periphery of the Heber Valley. These two towns were located along Daniels Creek near the mouth of Daniels Canyon which enters the Heber Valley south and west of Heber City.

The settlers at Upper Settlement dug a small ditch to irrigate existing fields and to

struction and maintenance of irrigation systems were fairly uniform across the Intermountain West, the social and legal systems for dividing and distributing water among the resident populations varied widely. In Colorado, for example, individual water rights were paramount, while in Wyoming a state-run bureaucracy controlled the distribution of water.

In Utah, the predominance of the Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) resulted in a theocratic organization of society which extended to water distribution. The Mormon principle of cooperative ownership and use of resources led to the Doctrine of Beneficial Use and Appropriation of water as the underlying legal basis for the distribution of water to local consumers.

The Doctrine of Beneficial Use and Appropriation held that all individuals who needed water were entitled to an equal share of the water. This was regardless of when they settled in the area or of their proximity to the water.

In the early stages of settlement along the Wasatch Front, the administration of water dis-

tions to help manage water distribution.

In 1862, Wasatch County Probate Judge John Witt authorized the formation of two water districts made up of local farmers. The water districts were located along the west and east sides of the Provo River. Under this system, a person wishing to obtain a water appropriation had to seek the approval of both the Probate Judge and the appropriate water district. The judge could then make his decision with the support of the water districts.

When the first two water districts were formed in the Heber Valley, the Probate Judge did not have the actual legal authority to authorize their formation. This oversight was rectified by the passage of the Irrigation District Act of 1865. This law authorized Probate Judges to allow local irrigation districts to be formed and outlined procedures that farmers must follow in order to petition for a water appropriation. A board of trustees would oversee the operations of the water district and would be responsible for the location and construction of canals.

The purpose of the water district was to ensure that the coop-

This company sought to obtain full water rights to Daniels Creek.

The traditional pattern of communal use of the water is evidenced in the adoption of the policy that no subscriber would be allowed to purchase more than 20 percent of the shares of the company.

With other sources of water being relatively scarce, the primary goal of the Buysville and Daniels area irrigators was to obtain exclusive rights to all water along Daniels Creek. The Charleston Irrigation Company had claims to a portion of the water from the creek and the Daniels Creek irrigators were interested in purchasing those rights.

This effort was further enhanced by the drought of 1879 which severely curtailed the amount of water available to the farmers. As a result, several irrigation companies were incorporated in the Heber Valley in the 1880s.

The Daniels Irrigation Company itself was not formed until 1922 when three existing irrigation companies joined together. These companies included the Strawberry Canal Company; organized in 1882, the Willow Creek Canal

Early Irrigation in the Heber Valley

The obstacles to successful fanning must have seemed daunting to the first European-American settlers of the Salt Lake Valley. Compared with the fertile fields of the East and Midwest, the conditions of the Salt Lake and Utah valleys required a radically different adaptive strategy for successful farming. Irrigation was quickly perceived as essential to successful farming. Soon after present-day Salt Lake City was settled in 1847, numerous small agricultural communities were founded along drainages of the Wasatch Front.

In 1852, an expedition of three men entered the Heber Valley. These men were looking over the Utah Territory to find suitable areas to establish new settlements. In his report, William Gardner indicated that the Provo River in the Heber Valley had a strong potential for providing irrigation water.

Despite this early indication of the suitability for settlement and agricultural development, it was not until 1858 that people began to take up residence in the valley.

In the spring of 1858, a group of four ranchers from the Utah Valley merged their herds and moved into the upper reaches of the Heber Valley. One year later, in the spring of 1859, the first farming communities were founded in the valley. By the fall

of 1860, this ditch became known as the Epperson Ditch. The Epperson Ditch eventually became a part of the Midway Irrigation Company which supplied water to a large area west of Heber City.

By 1862, the population of the Heber Valley and surrounding settlements had grown to such an extent that the formation of a new county was warranted. The area separated from Utah County was named Wasatch County with Heber City as the county seat.

The development of the Heber Valley and Wasatch County was temporarily halted in the mid-1860s by the outbreak of hostilities between Utah settlers and the Ute Indians, led by Chief Black Hawk. The so-called Black Hawk War lasted until 1867 and forced the Heber Valley residents to congregate around Heber City and other nearby settlements for protection.

The city of Midway was founded during this period when settlers from Mound City (Upper Settlement) and Lower Settlement congregated together "midway" between the two towns for protection during the conflict.

With the construction of irrigation systems came the need for social, economic, and legal institutions to organize and regulate the water. These institutions were responsible for dividing the resource as equitably as possible, and for mediating differences between their users.

While the methods of con-

struction of the canal to the equitable sharing of water resources.

In 1852, the territorial legislature passed a law giving authority for the management and distribution of natural resources within a county to the County Probate Judge. Individuals needing water for irrigation would petition the Probate Judge, indicating the amount and intended purpose of the water.

In theory, the judge's decision would be based on the merit of the petition. However, no specific legal guidelines existed upon which the judge might base his decision, and decisions were sometimes heavily influenced by powerful individuals in the community. The Probate Judge was closely affiliated with the Mormon Church, often being appointed to his first term in office on the basis of his church ties and approval by Brigham Young and the Territorial Legislature. This combination of legal and religious authority over the distribution of scarce resources made the Probate Judge one of the most powerful local county officials in Utah.

As both the population and the demand for water continued to increase during the 1860s, the pattern of water appropriation in the Heber Valley became increasingly disorganized. In an attempt to organize the patchwork pattern of small farms and fields, local water users began to band together to form associa-

ers would continue beyond the construction of the canal to the equitable sharing of water resources.

During the 1860s several small cooperative efforts were initiated to construct irrigation ditches. These efforts were undertaken by limited, informal associations of farmers wishing to divert water from the Provo River or from tributary drainages.

Along Daniels Creek, an association of water users was formed under the provisions of the 1865 law to regulate water from Daniels Creek and to develop other sources of water.

This irrigation effort led to further agricultural development in the Buysville area and to the organization of the Buysville Irrigation Company.

and the Daniels Creek Irrigation Company; organized in 1880.

The group of water users that formed the Daniels Irrigation Company combined their efforts to acquire a water supply to meet the irrigation needs for the community of Daniels.

Early in the history of irrigation in the state of Utah, the three canal companies that form the present-day Daniels Irrigation Company accomplished several fairly important feats in their efforts to obtain water for irrigation that will be discussed in an upcoming newspaper article.

The next installment of this article will be published in next week's Wasatch Wave.

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Request for Photographs

As part of the interpretive trail being developed along this canal system, a brochure is being produced that will be placed at a kiosk along the trail. This brochure presents a map of the trail, describes the history of irrigation in the area, and gives an overview of the remaining irrigation features.

It is important to include historic photographs in this brochure as well as in the upcoming newspaper article that showcases the early technological feats accomplished by the pioneering farmers and irrigators of the Heber Valley.

If you have, or know of, any photographs of construction, workers or completed features between Bjorkman's Hollow, the Strawberry Diversion, or McGuire Tunnel, we would like to copy them for inclusion in the brochure and a follow up newspaper story.

Please contact Terry Hickman, toll free, at the Central Utah Water Conservancy District at 1-800-281-7103 with information on historic photographs of the area.